

**Joint Statement of
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Before
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Concerning
Oversight of Fire Policy**

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INTRODUCTION

Madam Chair, Mr. Alexander, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Federal fire policy. Since the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) work closely together in wildland fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

FEDERAL WILDLAND FIRE POLICY

The Departments take seriously their responsibilities for the protection of people and property, and the nation's valuable natural resources from unwanted wildfire. Our Wildland Fire Management programs recognize fire as a critical natural process and the importance of integrating fire management consideration into land and resource management plans and activities. Federal managers and firefighters perform professionally under the most challenging of circumstances, managing wildfire across multiple landownership boundaries, and applying the best available science.

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) was established in April 2002 by the Secretaries to provide an intergovernmental committee to support the implementation and coordination of all aspects of Federal Fire Management Policy. The Departments, in collaboration with State, Tribal and local partners, have been implementing guidance that increases wildland fire managers' flexibility in managing wildfire to achieve both protection and resource objectives. Our implementation guidance recognizes two kinds of wildland fire: planned ignitions (prescribed fire), and unplanned ignitions (wildfire), and allows fire managers to manage a fire for multiple objectives and increase managers' flexibility to respond to changing incident conditions and firefighting capability while strengthening strategic and tactical decision implementation supporting public safety and resource management objectives. Initial action on human-caused wildfire will continue to suppress the fire at the lowest cost with the fewest negative consequences with respect to firefighter and public safety.

A new wildfire analysis and decision process, the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS), is being developed to improve decision documentation, risk

assessment/decision support, and operational implementation. This system will replace the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSa), Wildland Fire Implementation Plan (WFIP), Long-Term Implementation Plan (LTIP), and Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) and enhance managers' ability to analyze fire conditions and develop risk informed strategies and tactics.

The Key Principles we will be following this year include:

1. Safety always comes first in fire management.
 - No structure, or natural or cultural resource, is worth a human life.
 - When firefighters plan a tactic, the first question is always, "Can we do this safely?" If the answer is "no," they will take another direction.
2. Fire management decisions will be based on many factors.
 - Not all fires are managed the same way.
 - Responding to a fire may include using multiple strategies. The response could range from monitoring a fire that is beneficial to the landscape to aggressively putting out a fire that threatens people or important natural or cultural resources.
 - Decisions are based on safety for the public and firefighters, what is threatened by the fire, forecasted weather, fire behavior, and what the fire and land-use plans or objectives are for the area.
3. In fire, we all work together.
 - Local, State, Tribal and Federal firefighters all work together to keep the public safe and natural resources protected. Pooling our strengths, resources and experience improves our effectiveness and increases efficiencies.
4. Firefighters count on private landowners to take personal responsibility for their homes.
 - Homeowners in a fire-prone area should take a few simple steps to make their property more defensible. It will increase homeowner safety and that of firefighters. It will also increase the chance that a home will survive a fire.
 - Wildland firefighters are not responsible for making private homes defensible. Private landowners are, and the "Firewise" steps they take before the fire season begins may be the most important difference in whether their home survives or not.

Cohesive Strategy

The WFLC is in the process of developing a Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy). The Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act of 2009 (Title V, Section 503 of the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2010) requires the Secretaries, acting jointly, to submit to Congress a report that contains a cohesive strategy consistent with the recommendations described in recent reports of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) regarding management strategies by Fall, 2010. The Secretaries view this as an outstanding opportunity to engage our State, Tribal, local governments and

nongovernment partners as we work collaboratively to discuss the recommendations in the Quadrennial Fire Review and other reports, and consider the development of a national Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy.

ADDRESSING WILDLAND FIRE RISK TO COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Dangerous fire and fuels conditions exist in many areas in the United States, and the Departments are acting to reduce hazardous fuels on high priority lands, focusing especially on the wildland-urban interface. While increasingly complex landscapes complicate our wildfire suppression task, the Departments can and are aggressively treating hazardous fuels to help reduce the risk of catastrophic fire, especially to our communities. The Departments are continuing to refine their Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Assessment Systems to ensure funds are directed to highest priority projects in the highest priority areas, and complement the activities of neighboring States, Tribes, and local partners.

FY 2011 Budget

The President's FY 2011 Budget, which proposes approximately \$2.6 billion for the Forest Service and \$934 million for the Department of the Interior for Wildland Fire Management, represents an important development in the management and oversight of wildland fire management programs.

The 2011 Budget proposes a new three-tier system of (1) a regular suppression account, (2) the FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund account, and (3) a Presidential Wildfire Contingency Reserve account. The rolling 10-year average is fully funded, with funding split between the regular suppression account and the FLAME Fund. Each account requires a different level of responsibility for authorizing the expenditure of funds and includes the Secretaries and the President in the chain of command for wildfire suppression. For example, regular suppression funds would support initial attack and predictable firefighting costs, while FLAME funds would be used for the most severe, complex and threatening fires, and serve as a contingency reserve if the agencies exhaust their regular suppression resources due to an active fire season. The Presidential Wildfire Contingency Reserve account provides for responsible budgeting for wildfires in cases when funding requirements exceed projections and would be available to the respective Secretary subject to the issuance of a Presidential Finding when the suppression appropriation, fully funded at the 10-year average, is exhausted. The USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are committed to restoring the resilience and diversity of fire-adapted ecosystems on the landscape, consistent with public safety needs. The agencies and bureaus will identify, establish, and maintain necessary governance and risk management protocols to reduce any unnecessary risks to firefighters and our citizens in the short-term and reduce the risks to fire-adapted ecosystems in the long-term.

The FY 2011 Budget request promotes the use of hazardous fuels funding in a cost-effective manner in high priority areas, focusing on the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). This focuses treatments to more effectively reduce the risk of wildfire to communities.

The FY 2010 appropriation provides \$546 million in funding for hazardous fuels reduction. The President requests \$512 million in FY 2011. In addition to improving treatments, we collaborate with our local, State and Tribal partners more than ever before.

In 2011, a total of 2.3 million acres are planned, with the majority of treatments occurring in the wildland urban interface.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

The early outlook for the 2010 fire season indicates the following:

- Drought conditions continue to persist over northeast California and northwest Nevada, western Wyoming, western Montana, and much of Idaho. Snowpack in the Southwest has been well above average, while in western Wyoming through the northern Rockies the snowpack has been well below average.
- Abundant fine fuels across southern Arizona are expected to lead to a 4-6 week active grassland fire season. Fine fuels are not expected to be of concern in the Great Basin. There is an increased large fire risk over the California desert areas in June due to fine fuels decreasing to normal by July.
- In areas with above average snowpack, fire season onset will be delayed due to a later snowpack melt.
- Early indications suggest monsoon onset will occur around the typical start date or late with associated precipitation amounts normal for the season.

To prepare for conditions anticipated in the 2010 Fire Season, the USDA and DOI are continually working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. Fire managers have assigned local, regional, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity with the help of information from the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services group. We will continue to improve our communication, coordination, assessing and managing risk, and decision making skills.

The Departments will continue to deploy analytic support tools to improve fire incident and program decision-making, and agency accountability. A number of Wildland Fire Decision Support Systems (such as FSPRO, which models fire behavior, and RAVAR, which models values at risk from fire) provide real-time support to fire managers implementing Risk-Informed Management. These efforts are coupled with program reforms such as strategic and operational protocols, improved oversight, and use of a risk management framework that ensure fire management resources are appropriately focused. The Forest Service, in collaboration with the Department of the Interior, is updating the fire planning and budget analysis process through the Fire Program Analysis system. In summary, the budget promotes safe, cost-effective and accountable outcomes from investments made in managing fire on landscapes.

Firefighting Forces/Retention

For the 2010 fire season, we are securing firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2009. More than 18,000 firefighters will

be available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. This figure includes levels consistent with 2009 for highly-trained firefighting crews, smokejumpers, Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents, Type 2 incident management teams (which are available for geographical or national incidents). The Forest Service will have 4 National Incident Management Organizations comprised of professionals permanently assigned to teams available.

Aviation

Aviation resources are one of a number of tools available to accomplish fire related land management objectives. We note that during any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of air support. Aviation resources are most useful for initial attack and in supporting management objectives on large-scale fire operations. A diverse fleet composed of a mix of types of aircraft with specific mission strengths provide a toolbox for fire managers to use with specific fire situations. The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of the Forest Service 2010 aviation assets include up to 19 civilian large air tankers on Federal contracts, along with up to 26 Type 1 heavy helicopters and 41 Type 2 medium helicopters on national exclusive-use contracts; 52 Type 3 helicopters on local or regional exclusive-use contracts, and 8 Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System units that will be available for deployment subject to available military aircraft. Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activity dictate. Likewise, Interior will maintain a mix of aviation resources in 2010 similar to that used in 2009, relying on single engine air tankers and helicopters.

Earlier this month, the Forest Service submitted the Interagency Aviation Strategy to Congress as required by the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies FY 2010 Appropriations Act. The report was prepared by the National Interagency Aviation Council with input from representatives from various State and Federal agencies.

Joint Fire Science Program

The Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP) Governing Board invests in science and science delivery projects from an interagency perspective, and believes great value is added to all participating agencies from this approach. The Program emphasizes science delivery, program evaluation, and long-term science, all in response to specific recommendations of its governing board, and is currently engaged in three lines of work:

Software system integration – JFSP is funding development of an Interagency Fuels Treatment Decision Support System (IFT-DSS). This data and software integration framework is scheduled for completion and potential transition to an operational system in FY 2012.

Smoke and emissions – JFSP recently invested in smoke model validation work and science addressing regional haze and low-level smoke dispersion. Science planning is underway to identify investments needed to integrate results from this work into operational smoke management tools.

Fuel treatments – JFSP has invested heavily in research evaluating fuel treatment effectiveness and effects, and is currently investing in fuel treatment guides for managers, lifecycle fuel treatment regimes, insect and wind effects on fuel profiles, and climate change effects on fuel treatment effectiveness.

FIRE SUPPRESSION

A variety of factors, stemming from climate change, persistent drought and hazardous fuels conditions and the increased magnitude and complexity of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) affect wildfires.

Our Departments are committed to carrying through with reforms to contain fire costs and improve management, while simultaneously maintaining firefighter and public safety. In particular, we recognize the financial impact of WUI suppression activities on costs and will continue to aggressively pursue cost-mitigation measures in addition to focusing the majority of hazardous fuels funding for treatments in the WUI including utilizing risk-informed performance based suppression strategies; clarifying roles and responsibilities in the WUI; utilizing appropriate cost-share agreements; and deploying decision support tools. The strategy of focusing on high priority fuels within the WUI will help deter the risks to communities posed by wildfires. In addition, hazardous fuels treatments reduce safety risks to firefighters and can reduce wildfire suppression costs.

In FY 2010, the Departments are continuing to deploy analytic support tools to improve fire incident and program decision-making, and agency accountability.

The 2010 Interior Appropriations bill established FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund accounts in the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. These funds become available to the Secretary to be transferred into the regular suppression account when funds provided for wildfire suppression and Federal emergency response in the Wildland Fire Management appropriation accounts are nearly exhausted, and/or when certain objective criteria are met. Funds may be transferred from the FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund upon a declaration by the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture. Declarations must be based on specific protocols and criteria. As fires escape initial response, and as Type 1 or Type 2 Incident Management teams are assigned to those escaped incidents, a risk assessment and a formal risk decision will be made, which will be part of the declaration for a request to the Secretary to move funds from the FLAME Act account into the suppression account.

A number of analytical tools (Wildland Fire Decision Support Systems (WFDSS, FSPro, which models fire behavior, and RAVAR, which models values at risk from fire) will be used to provide real-time support to fire managers implementing risk-informed management. The Secretary may make a declaration in the event the suppression account is nearly exhausted.

FIREFIGHTER AND PUBLIC SAFETY

We would like to emphasize that a core goal underlying our activities remains providing for firefighter and public safety. For example, on the first night on the Station Fire,

engine crews spotted a spot fire below the Angeles Crest Highway and debated different possibilities of dealing with the spot fire. It was very dark, limiting sight. The canyon slope was steep and the terrain was unfamiliar. At the time, there was no direct immediate threat to public safety. The crew assessed the situation and determined that they could not safely go down that slope and suppress the spot fire. The risk to the crew, given the circumstances, was too high.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our statement, we would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.